

# Keeping Farmland Available for Klickitat County Agriculture: Topical Summary of Public Comments

On October 21, 22, and 23, and again on November 18, 19, and 20, public meetings were conducted at local Grange Halls in three locations in Klickitat County, WA: Centerville, White Salmon, and Bickleton. The purpose of these six meetings was to take community input and hear public reactions the future of agriculture and of agricultural lands.

At our first three meetings, public participants were asked to express their views on three general subjects, but with an emphasis on the first two of the following:

1. What is your 20 year vision for the future of agriculture in Klickitat County?
2. What issues, problems, concerns or barriers stand in the way of achieving that vision?
3. What ideas, solutions, or opportunities might help overcome those barriers?

At the second series of three meetings, we continued to identify issues and concerns, but focused our attention on the third of the above three questions and tried to identify actions that could be taken, especially at the local level, that could help us solve the problems and achieve our vision for the future of agriculture.

The below list summarizes the public comments from all of these six meetings as well as comments received by phone and through direct conversation from people who were unable to attend and participate in the meetings themselves. It attempts to break all of these comments and ideas down by general subject matter for convenience in understanding them.

## **20-year vision for agriculture in Klickitat County:**

- Land use and community character
  - Rural character of Klickitat County is maintained
  - The expansion from trout lake up to surrounding areas like Glenwood is slowed
  - Buyers of properties are better educated to the surrounding land uses when they by and make better choices regarding the placement of houses, roads, etc.
- Profitability of agriculture
  - Agriculture is healthy and strong
  - Some CRP lands are returned to productive agriculture
  - Agriculture is integrated into an overall economic development plan for the County
  - Agriculture is a more profitable industry than it is now
  - Agriculture will be likely to need larger and larger acreages, rather than smaller, in the years to come – needs to be possible
  - The industry is engaged in cooperative marketing of local Klickitat County agricultural production

- Continuation of family farming
  - Want to see a future with farms that are large enough and profitable enough to support family farming – ideally without the necessity of outside income
  - Would like agriculture to remain more or less as it is now, with farm sizes at least as large as they are now and would like agriculture to be sufficiently profitable to make that possible
  - Need our farms to be able to grow, but try to make it so they are not forced to do so
- Diversity of agriculture
  - Agriculture is redefined and supported as might be needed to allow it to adapt to future changes
  - We see a more diverse agriculture industry
  - Want to see a diverse agriculture industry with uses appropriate to the varied climates and land types in Klickitat County

### **Issues, concerns, barriers:**

- Rate and pressure for development
  - Overdevelopment and pressure for development too great
  - People are increasingly going to want to move here because it is so desirable
  - Development pressure from areas like Trout Lake is increasingly affecting broader area – e.g. up toward Glenwood.
  - Need to find a balance between the pressures and impacts of tourism and the economic development benefits of tourism.
  - Seeing a number of 20 acre parcel sales. More of the pressure for this is in the Western part of the County, but some to the east as well.
- Taxes
  - Personal property tax and tax on improvements to land is increasing the burdens on farm businesses
  - The eligibility of 20-acre parcels for current use taxation is another motivation/incentive for large subdivisions NOT to cluster. If they cluster, they have to take the land OUT of current use and have to pay back taxes and penalties. If they sell 20s, the assumption is that the land remains in current use.
  - Inheritance taxes contribute to breaking up the land
- Water
  - Availability of water is a huge key concern for the future of agriculture
  - Residential development competes with agriculture for water
  - The land (and available water) must be able to support the proposed residential use
  - Water is a huge limiting factor for farms – exempt wells increase the competition for water
  - Water is a big limiting issue
- Zoning & land use regulation
  - Zoning law splits land up in unnatural ways
  - The productive capacity of the land has to be the number one criteria for whether it is used for agriculture or used for development
  - Zoning law imposes arbitrary lot sizes without regard to the land's capacity to support any particular use

- “In perpetuity” is hard to plan for
- With the current system, the potential exists for pretty much all of Klickitat County to end up subdivided into 20-acre parcels
- 20-acre parcel size uses up huge amounts of land for non-farm uses. Worst possible scenario
- 20-acre zoning in at least some agricultural areas needs to be increased to 80 or 160 acres.
- Need to have the opportunity to sell only smaller parcels
- There is a current cluster ordinance, but it requires commission action, so it is more involved and difficult to do than just to sell 20-acre parcels which is permitted automatically. So most people just sell the 20s. Recent sales of 20s have brought \$175,000 each
- Current ordinance really doesn’t provide any incentive to cluster
- There is a good deal of land sprinkled around the County in State, Federal, and Tribal Ownership. This complicates the task of finding well organized, area-based solutions that take into account appropriate land management and the desires of local landowners. It is also difficult to deal with State, Federal, and Tribal owners
- Current zoning makes the assumption that 20-acre parcel is a farm parcel when, in fact, they usually are not. By virtue of being 20-acres, most of these parcels easily qualify for open-space taxation. (Fiscal impact for county.)
- Need to find ways to avoid incompatible uses – Right to Farm?
- Sales of 20 acre parcels that end up used for residential or recreation skirt the rules and use up a lot of land unnecessarily
- Land use and farm business needs
  - Farmers don’t have control of their markets and prices so they need to be able to be flexible in their use of their land
  - The farm’s land is most farmers’ insurance policy – if you break a leg, you can sell a parcel of land to cover the health care costs. Need to have the chance to do this.
  - Developers make all the real profit from development – farmers need to be partnered in the development so they participate in these profits rather than just selling and then standing by and watching it happen.
  - Farmers need large, 2,000 acre plus farms to make a living
  - The trend is for the number of acres required to increase (20 years ago, 500 acres was typical – today it is closer to 2,000 acres)
  - The American farmer’s competitive advantage in the global market is to be capital intensive, with investments in expensive equipment allowing farming on large acreages with minimum labor cost – makes these large parcels necessary for internationally competitive agriculture
  - The possibilities for crop diversity in some areas is limited – need to assure that land is available for the crops that can be produced
  - CRP has been an important aid to many farms – there are mixed feeling about whether it is a net good or bad
- Profitability and economic development for agriculture
  - Fuel prices and feed costs increasing – profitability is weak
  - Economic Development funding requires the creation of a junior tax district – not something that usually works for most agricultural issues.

- Public ignorance and education
  - Owners of many non-farm (or marginal farm) properties are trying to stay in current use and are looking to surrounding farmers to farm their land – but often the land is broken up with a house right in the center of a 20-acre parcel – makes it difficult to use for agriculture. Need to be educated about this or to facilitate or provide incentives for different practices
  - Some larger farms end up purchased by inexperienced farmers or non-farmers
- Forest lands:
  - Protection of commercial forest lands and the success of forest businesses also needs to be a priority of this effort

### **Ideas and solutions for overcoming barriers and achieving vision:**

- Limit regulation and free up markets
  - We need to limit regulation – no new regulations
  - Let the market control what happens to the land
  - Regulations are an issue for farmers, but there does not seem to be a great deal of regulatory pressure coming from Klickitat County at the county level.
  - Permitting for farm structures is not generally difficult in Klickitat County, but it might be helpful if the requirements and process were clarified for farmers and better understood by them
  - There also does not seem to be a great deal of concern about condemnation (by the County) or about County land acquisitions.
  - While the County itself does not condemn or acquire that much land, it may play a role in acquisitions by other governments (State, Federal?) and to the extent that it does, the County should have a policy that recognizes the value of farmland and provides some priority to its protection.
- Taxes
  - Need to repeal the estate tax or provide an exemption for agricultural lands – this results in land having to be sold to pay these taxes
  - Need to find a way to use the current use tax as an incentive to cluster, rather than as it works now where it is the reverse (an incentive NOT to cluster).
  - Should have exemption for agricultural lands from Estate Taxes
  - Personal property taxes are complex and difficult to fully and fairly comply with. They need to be simplified. When an item of personal household property is used in any way in the farm business (what is the line here?) it becomes taxable as a business personal property item. This is difficult to comply with.
  - The Current Use tax program requires that 80% of the property be used in agriculture – this is often difficult to comply with when the topography makes that impractical. It might be better for the public interest not to be pressuring farmers and ranchers to use some of this unproductive land in any case.
  - Would like to see the County active and involved at the State level in helping shape State Current Use Tax laws and personal property tax laws that would be more friendly to local farmers.
  - Do need to better educate/inform farmers/landowners on their opportunities and responsibilities with respect to current use and personal property tax issues.

- There seem to be a number of exemptions about which most farmers may not be aware. There needs to be education about these issues for farmers.
- There is a need for clarity and better broad understanding of the current use program rules so those who should be in the program can be and those who should not are not.
- There is a mix of views on the importance of current use taxation to the success and sustainability of agriculture – but there is general support for the program
- 20 acre parcel owners are typically not truly in agriculture but they often lease their land to a producer as a means of keeping the lower tax rate. This is of value to the producers who lease the land – so it shouldn't be seen as an unfair advantage for the landowner.
- The program does need to be fair and true to its purpose of preserving agriculture if it is to retain its credibility and to survive politically in the future.
- Need the County to support the independence of the local County Assessor to use local discretion in applying the law.
- Changes to zoning & land use requirements
  - Permit only the buying and selling of “house potential” properties – if a lot doesn't have real potential to support a residence. Don't permit subdivision and sale unless, for example, there is some reasonable likelihood of water availability
  - Need to use a new “land capacity” criteria for which properties can be subdivided and how large or small they need to be before lots and/or sold for residential use
  - Developers/sub-dividers should be required to provide and pay for water, sewer, roads, and other actual costs of development rather than just subdividing and selling.
  - Lots closer to town should be smaller, and then gradually be larger as the distance from town increases.
  - Identify where farms should be and where housing should be and allow subdivision and permitting accordingly
  - Allow the sale of smaller parcels so there is less land used up in 20-acre housing
  - Change eligibility for current use exemption to encourage clustering. Simplify cluster ordinance and provide incentives to cluster.
  - Need to be able to treat the entire farm as a parcel – think of the parcel size as the size needed to sustain a family farm given the area, climate, and productive type and capacity of the land. Need to think of preserving farms, not parcels
  - Need better planning in road design so adjacent roads do not interfere with agriculture
  - Should consider having 3 sizes/types of agricultural zoning for East, Central, & West
  - The County's widespread use of 20 acre parcel size fragments up the land base into sizes usually (but not always) too small for agriculture. This will be somewhat different east to west – depends on one's definition of a farm.
  - Need to protect landowner property rights and property values.
  - Cluster zoning seems like a useful tool – although there is some concern about creating large clustered groups of residential properties.
  - It seems unlikely that a density bonus would be allowed in exchange for clustering.
  - Right to farm laws may not be sufficient to truly help once non-farm neighbors take up residence.
  - The current cluster process isn't used because:
    - It is too slow, uncertain, and expensive

- Landowner can avoid the current use tax payback/penalties with 20-acre parcels – if clustered, must pay back the taxes at least on the land that is clustered
    - Simple short plat can avoid requirements for water right by Dept of Ecology.
  - We should look hard for ways to improve the cluster zoning process to make it easier and to provide incentives for its use.
  - Cluster zoning represents one of the few, best opportunities to help agriculture without prejudicing property rights. This and PDR seem like the two most direct and useful tools.
  - We need to identify, map, and classify agricultural and forest lands and prioritize them so we can apply additional incentives for protection of those that are most important to protect.
  - The current zoning code was adopted in 1979 and has not been looked at often enough – needs to be adapted to modern needs. Need to take another look.
  - Lands are currently being looked at for inclusion as agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance – this makes landowners nervous that they might lose the chance to sell or subdivide if included.
  - Landowners are concerned about having their land designated as being of “long-term commercial significance” because they worry that this will, at some point in the future, mean that they won’t be allowed to sell it for other uses, even though they can’t make it pay for agriculture.
- Purchase of development rights (PDR):
  - Some landowners are uneasy with the idea of perpetual easements – but would be OK with some time-limited or lease arrangements.
  - There are no local matching funds at the county level for this program, but State and Federal funding can match each other to make it work.
  - There needs to be a County strategy, approach, or process for prioritizing properties that would be eligible for PDR. This can, for example, help to group acquisitions together and avoid isolated parcels being acquired that don’t support each other.
  - This could be a role for an agriculture advisory commission.
  - There does not seem to be much interest in or possibility of using transfer of development rights (TDR) in Klickitat County.
  - PDR is an important tool that needs to be in the toolbox and an option for local farmers. This and clustering seem to be the most immediately workable tools.
  - We will need to have a way to prioritize the lands that get protected by this means.
  - There is probably no real use for transfer of development rights (TDR) in Klickitat County.
  - The group supports PDR as a tool to be used in the toolbox and supports the County being involved. But there is concern for government “creep.” Want to see the county’s role limited, at least initially.
  - PDR seems like a good idea, but it needs to be farmer driven.
- Other non-regulatory land use protections
  - When good farmland enters the UGB – need still to find ways to keep it in agriculture
  - Find a way to pay farmers to keep their land in agricultural use
  - Need market incentives to keep farmland in use for agriculture
- Public, landowner, and farmer education & technical assistance

- Need educational programs for farmers
- Need public education about agriculture
- Could provide energy audits for farms that would help farmers save on energy
- Improved education for buyers as to the surrounding land uses and as to the appropriate placement of houses, roads, etc.
- Educate property buyers re placement of houses and roads or provide incentives
- Need consumer education concerning the environmental, local, and other impacts of different types of products, different types of agriculture, and the locale of their production
- There needs to be better methods of communication between agriculture and non-agriculture residents
- The County Fair represents an opportunity to strengthen communication
- Also need to provide support for programs that help educate/inform farmers as to issues affecting agriculture.
- Public education is a high priority
- Agriculture industry needs help in getting information out to the non-farm public
- Need County support for any means that might be available to communicate about agriculture.
- This is an important need – farmers must get the word out about their needs and the importance of their role and of the value of what they provide – food and otherwise.
- One way to get the word out to new buyers about agriculture is through realtors. But there is also concern that realtors will deliver the wrong message – especially about right to farm issues.
- Supplement farm incomes with other land use revenue
  - Could provide support for energy conservation in agriculture
  - Enhance opportunities for wind energy
  - Seek other possibilities for non-agricultural land use incomes
  - Wind is an option – not perfect, but can be useful in helping provide a mix of income sources that keeps agriculture profitable. Need to find further/additional ways to use wind energy
  - Additional and new natural resource income activities will typically require their own infrastructure – e.g. for wind, there are the service employees who need local housing. Need an integrated community support system to make these kinds of things work well.
  - One option (of the type mentioned above) might be green payments or ecosystem services markets.
  - Wind energy and the additional revenue it provides are important for agriculture. Need to be looking for other types of similar land use resources that can live successfully alongside farming as revenue streams.
- Improve agriculture profitability – economic development
  - Improve the profitability of agriculture and the land will stay in ag use
  - Need to make sure agriculture is profitable, farmers are making money
  - Find out how farmers are currently marketing their products and then figure out how to improve and support their marketing
  - Produce and consume locally.

- Could consider a USDA-approved local mobile slaughtering unit for local sales of local livestock
- May be a place for a local cooperative grain mill. There is an idle flour mill currently in The Dalles
- Increased organic production creates new opportunities for agriculture
- Cooperative marketing of agricultural products from Klickitat County
- Integration of agriculture into economic development planning
- Need economic development planning to: 1) Help guide and advise local farmers in their business investments and, 2) Help guide other land use and economic development plans and activities in the community
- Need a farmer processing plant for grains. Also livestock slaughtering
- Need strong “Heart of Washington” support
- Need local, Klickitat County branding
- Need more support to marketing local agricultural products
- Cooperative marketing would help
- Need to create a tourism based on agriculture
- Keep it local – strong support for local agriculture
- Need local processing and finishing
- Need stronger agriculture participation in and on the local economic development council. Agriculture needs to be taken into account as key industry in the County.
- Need to develop a strategic plan for agricultural economic development in Klickitat County – could work with the Economic Development Office to accomplish this.
- There may be some opportunities for cooperative ventures locally.
- Need a local USDA approved livestock slaughtering facility – maybe one of the mobile slaughtering facilities would work in this region (both sides of the River).
- Farmers need training in small acreage farming and on a variety of other issues
- Should adopt a policy that allows/encourages schools (and other public institutions) to prioritize their food acquisitions from local producers.
- Could the County help strengthen access to capital/lending by local farmers?
- County support is needed to encourage additional income sources from the land that are consistent with agriculture – wind power and natural gas leases?
- Economic development issues are a high priority for this area.
- Need economic development strategic plan for local agriculture. Such a plan can:
  - Identify possible areas where the government can help make it easier for farmers to survive and their land stay in agriculture
  - Identify trends and possibilities that can help farmers plan for their own operation’s future and farm-related support businesses to make good choices.
  - Identify possible ways farmers and farm groups might work cooperatively in the private sector to fill emerging needs of agriculture.
- Should facilitate opportunities for cooperative support businesses. One example might be a coop winery for the wine grape industry
- There is a need for a slaughtering facility – but this can require compromises – not everyone wants a slaughtering facility next door.
- There might be possibilities for a mobile slaughtering facility in the Gorge area.
- There should be possibilities for local branding and labeling, for sales locally and for sales out of county as well.

- Non-market support for agriculture
  - Should have some kind of health insurance and retirement programs provided for farmers – as it is they are largely on their own
  - Need a program of farmer health insurance, retirement programs, and retirement planning
  - Should provide a reliable source of access to capital for agriculture investment
- Community processes
  - It might be useful to have an Agriculture Advisory Commission/Committee appointed by the County Commission, specifically for the purpose of advising the Commission on issues that come up that affect agriculture and to develop local plans for the future of agriculture.
  - Need to empower community council work on these problems
  - If the County has no agriculture program, there may be little need for an Agriculture Advisory Commission. But if there is a significant County effort in any of these areas we're discussing, an agriculture advisory group could be important.
  - An Ag Commission could include representation that is broader than just farmers – but this is an issue that needs to be evaluated. The group would need to have a clear and somewhat narrow focus on issues related to the future of agriculture and agricultural lands.
  - While it seems generally OK to have an advisory committee, there is a concern about government creep and about too much County staff time being devoted to staff support.
- Water
  - The existing water set-aside agreement for water from the aluminum plant should be made available for use by farmers who have applied and been on the list and waiting for long periods for water rights
  - Landowners should be able and allowed to use their water right in water crossing their property to generate electric power and to use it in their operations and/or sell it back into the grid.
  - Most of the water issues seem to be controlled at other levels of government
  - Many Klickitat County residents believe there is more water available than we are allowed to use.
  - Agriculture is driven by the availability of water. The conversion of agricultural lands to non-ag uses is steadily reducing the water that will be available for agriculture.
  - For many of the water issues in the County, it would be very helpful if there was a thorough and credible study available that documents the availability of water. This would help Klickitat County plan and help County residents make their case for access to water, if it is there.
  - Need to support the WRIA and hydrologic study now going on. Landowners need to be supportive and involved in the well monitoring required. This problem is more comprehensive than just one limited area – the study may need to be expanded.
  - Should be ways to support water banking/storage in the area.
  - Need to protect water recharge areas – including the protection of farmlands.
  - The County should be active at the State level in advocating for solutions to the water issue.

- The Columbia River Initiative does involve increased storage, but there may not be much in that for Klickitat County. Should be looking for storage possibilities.
- Farmers should have access (even if temporary) to water that is now being held for the closed aluminum plant.
- Water is a critical, priority issue.
- Right to farm:
  - We might require buyers in an ag area to sign a document at closing that acknowledges their acceptance of RTF issues or waives nuisance claim rights – is this legal
  - We need strong public education about RTF
  - Whitman County seems to have a strong RTF law.
  - The County should make another careful review of our RTF ordinance to see if there are ways it could be strengthened consistent with State law. We could clarify the definitions and balance the needs that it addresses.
  - Some of the suggestions seem useful, but are they legal? We need a legal opinion on what is possible. County should investigate stronger RTF law and do it if possible and legal.
  - A strong right to farm law is important – so if there are opportunities to improve it, the County should look at those opportunities.
  - It is important that the county law be consistent with the State law.
  - Klickitat County has a relatively good RTF law currently.
  - In doing any rewrite, need to not undermine or weaken the existing law, which is a pretty good one.
- Farm transition:
  - Transition of land from selling farmer to a new farmer is an important issue
  - Farmers need retirement planning and estate planning help
  - Farm businesses need to have a business plan for transition to new owner – even within the same family
  - Farm transition issues are tied to economic development issues – we need to help these farm businesses stay healthy even when they (and the land) are sold.
  - Help for farmers with farm transition is an important need
  - Could support any of the existing programs (DNR, Conservation District, FarmLink, etc.)
  - The County could help, here, by supporting education and information programs, but should not be involved in any direct way with these transitions.
- Other issues and outstanding proposals from community
  - This study and whatever plan results from it should apply to both farm and forest lands
  - *Trout Lake Cluster/Extensive Agriculture Zone:* Encourage voluntary clustering on parent parcels of 40 acres and above by allowing non-farm lots of 1-2 acres on the least farmable land while preserving at least 75% of total acreage from further subdivision by permanent covenant.
  - *Farmland Preservation Zone (Jake Anderson proposal):* Create incentives for farmers to use only non-productive lands in development for non-farm purpose, to cluster development, and to slow the rate of development. To accomplish this, create a voluntary participation Ag Preservation Zone which: allows increased density for

farmers who wish to participate but creates a schedule that slows the rate of allowed development over time; requires least productive lands to be developed first; allows for further accessory uses; and, provides for county grants for costs of application and for payment of back-taxes required under current use program.

- Need to evaluate some of the ideas represented in the existing plans/proposals that have been offered in the community (e.g. Jake Anderson proposal, Trout Lake cluster proposal, etc.). There are a number of good ideas contained in these proposals

Dated: 12/5/08